

Government Orders

multinationals that manufacture, trade and retail the products of child labour often claim that they do not hire the children directly but they never acknowledge that they knowingly subcontract out parts of the manufacturing process to employers that do.

Child labour has become an integral part of the new world order of trade liberalization and gives the lie to any glorification of unregulated world trade as a force of progress. For the pathetic armies of children in the developing world, market liberalization means a regression to the brutal exploitation that we in the developed countries have not permitted for more than a century.

Because it has become part of the fabric of the new international economy, child labour implicates all of us as consumers. On any visit to the local mall, unknowingly we are likely to buy for our own children clothes and toys made under conditions that would horrify us if we imagined our own children in their situation. Here is a case where we must let our basic human sympathy, our sense of solidarity with children around the world move us to act. Some have argued that when developed countries today restrict trade in goods made by child labour they are forgetting the role that child labour played in their own development and acting to deliberately restrict the development of new economies.

• (1600)

We in the developed world have indeed had our own experience with child labour, which was as much a part of European and North American industrialization as it is now in many developed societies today. We must remember that government regulations prohibiting the use of child labour were among the earliest public interventions to tame a predatory industrial capitalism. The fact that the same predatory capitalism has returned with a vengeance, its leaders boasting of their ability to operate outside the regulatory reach of individual states, does not relieve us of our duty to protect the most vulnerable members of the global village.

The multinationals like to talk about the need to establish a level playing field. Let us establish one between them and the children whom they now exploit. The elimination of child labour will be a long and arduous process that takes place on many fronts. The International Labour Organization has a program that has been in place for years to study and propose measures to address the problem. Canada should actively support this program.

The ILO secretariat has also recommended that the WTO should adopt a social clause to enforce basic labour rights on member states, a strategy that would go a long way to eliminating child labour. This is why we proposed a separate amendment earlier today that the government chose not to support, that the government commit itself to such a policy of developing a social clause for the WTO.

Some individual governments of developing countries are making efforts to introduce regulations to help children and some of these programs, such as the one in Hong Kong, have met with success. Many developing countries do not have the resources to police regulations on child labour, however well intended those regulations may be. That is why the developed countries like Canada have an obligation to help the governments of developing countries prevent multinationals from trading in goods made by children.

That is why we are proposing this amendment today to Bill C-57. It would put the burden of proof on the large importers and retailers to establish that they have not imported goods made with child labour and apply the resources of the Canadian regulatory regime to police the problem.

Mr. Charlie Penson (Peace River, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, this is an interesting motion, one that in spirit I would agree with but in practicality is going to be very difficult to deal with. That has been recognized by the countries that have been negotiating this GATT agreement for the past seven years. That is why it is not in the current GATT agreement.

The intent of this amendment is certainly good. It is to end child exploitation, especially in third world countries. The difficulty is that a multilateral trade agreement is not the forum for this. Children's rights are protected under the International Convention on the Rights of the Child through the United Nations.

Some of the difficulties were outlined by the member for the Battlefords—Meadow Lake when he said that individual countries do not have the resources to police this kind of intervention.

I would like to pose a question for the member: Do we have the resources? In other words, on every article of clothing or textiles that come from some third world country, how would we prove that this is not made using child labour? It is very, very difficult. I think we have to work through the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and encourage these individual countries to stop the exploitation in those areas.

Just another interesting little sidelight. It also raises some questions about practices that we have at home, practices that I think are actually quite good.

I have a grain farm. We have four children who all worked on that grain farm prior to reaching the age of 16. They learned responsibility at a very early age. They learned how that business worked. There are literally hundreds of thousands of businesses in Canada that have children of the owners working and learning the system, learning how to conduct business in those businesses. Would that not also raise the question of our own practices at home? I do not think those are bad practices.

I have to oppose this. The spirit of it is I think right, but we have to pursue it through the proper avenues.